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ABSTRACT

Characteristics of colleges that may indicate the need for a chief information officer (CIO) are identified, along with factors that might lead to failure in taking this direction. An example of an institution that encountered problems when they hired a CIO is included. Factors leading to success are as follows: (1) a well-thought-out position on computing based on experience; (2) upper-level administrators and faculty who are knowledgeable about technology; (3) current school computer employees who are knowledgeable about the institution and about higher education in general; (4) institutional leaders who have internalized enough of the issues surrounding technology in higher education to be able to make informed judgments; (5) a school with a governance structure in place that listens to input from all over the campus; (6) an institution that has made significant inroads into end-user computing and distributed processing; and (7) an institution that has an overall strategic plan in place, from which the long-range computing plan can be drawn. Schools who do not meet the criteria are advised not to establish the position of CIO. Having a CIO on campus too early means taking a risk that there will not be the needed support structure for the CIO to succeed. (SW)

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CHOOSING A CHIEF INFORMATION OFFICER

The Myth of the Computer Czar

by Linda H. Fleit

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Position Announcement: Computer Czar

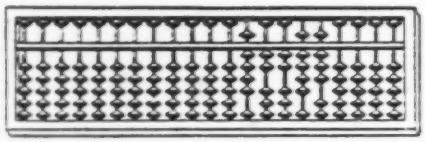
Job Description: Responsibility for all high-level decisions involving technology on campus, including, but not limited to: computers of all sizes, shapes, and manufacture; telephones for communicating everything from local campus gossip to Star Wars research data; networks (local, interuniversity, and intergalactic); videodisc technology involving computer-assisted instruction as well as yesterday's episode of Search for Tomorrow; all office automation; and, if there's time left over, administration of mail services and all campus libraries.

Qualifications: Profound technical skills, infinite patience, uncommon intelligence, extraordinary interpersonal abilities, and a proven management track record. A Ph.D. in either artificial intelligence or cybernetic socioeconomics wouldn't hurt either. Merely walking on water doesn't matter much here; it's the ability to mix water and oil, jump into it headfirst, and come out smelling like a rose that counts. In other words, we want someone who is smart enough to do the work and dumb enough to take the job.

Sound familiar? Advertisements almost like this appear with increasing frequency in the pages of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Sometimes the position is Vice Chancellor for Information Services; sometimes it's Associate Vice President for Computing and Related Technologies; or sometimes it's just plain Vice President. Whatever it's called, the position really is Computer Czar, a relatively new, quite powerful, but often misunderstood position. The tip-offs that it is a czar: the post is at least one level above a Director, and it reports to a very high level in the institution, occasionally even to the President.

The post would *seem* to make sense. After all, American colleges and universities spend around $4.5 billion dollars a year on computing activities. Surely that spending requires careful coordination. With the spread of microcomputers, and more people on campus wanting to do their own thing with computing, it just stands to reason there should be a single point of responsibility in each institution to make sure it all happens properly. There are communications to worry about, and user satisfaction, and effectiveness as well as efficiency, and certainly the technology itself is changing so quickly that everyone can possibly be expected to keep current. So it makes perfectly good sense to have this new position to take care of it all. Right?

Well, it would be handy if that was the answer, but it really is "Not necessarily . . ." In fact, not only does it not make sense for many institutions to establish and staff this new position, it can be downright harmful in the long run.



CAUTION: Having a Computer Czar can be hazardous to the health of your institution!

One might wonder why I say this. We can all point to universities that established this position long before it became fashionable, institutions that are merrily computing away, and are very glad they made this decision.

With all of the publicity, indeed, one might think there are many schools that have done this. In fact, according to a survey I conducted recently, there are fewer than 100 institutions that actually have a czar (or czarina). There are, however, many more that are in the process of either establishing the position or trying to fill it. Which leads to the first problem in this picture: there simply are not enough people to fill the positions available. And this situation is only going to get worse.

It's not just that the position expectations may be unrealistic. The very nature of computing itself has always, since its start, led to shortages of people qualified to deal with it. This is true whether we're talking about programmers, operators, systems analysts, or

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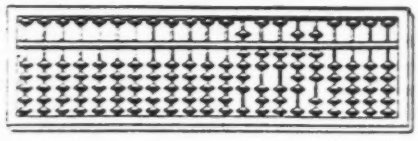
the guys who sneak in under cover of darkness to do preventive maintenance on the mainframes. And it's especially true for the higher levels—people who can mix technology with management perspective with organizational skills. These people are so rare that they just rotate among institutions, leaving new vacancies behind them. The number of czar positions coming available outpaces the number of people qualified to fill them.

We move next to related problems, the fallout, if you will, of the shortages. Czars' salaries often far exceed what even a long-tenured faculty member on campus receives. (This alone suggests something may be very wrong.) The administration of an institution is supposed to keep overhead to a minimum; but the marketplace, the law of supply and demand, requires that we pay these administrators a lot of money. Even worse, sometimes we must even pay a bounty to get one to come to our institution in the first place! (Known in the old days and in less dignified circles as employment agency fees, the tab for having someone help you recruit a czar can run to 30% of the annual salary.)

Even so, there are schools that already have a czar in place—a hundred or so out of the 3200 schools in the US, a hundred that went to the trouble to define their needs, establish the position, and were lucky enough to fill it. We might even be rash and say that every one of these schools is content and feels that it made a wise, cost-effective decision. The question then is, what types of places are these? Is it reasonable to assume that other institutions should use them as role models? In other words, might there be schools that are particularly compatible for a czar, that have institutional characteristics without which the position would be untenable? The answer is yes.

We should be more specific about the term "czar." Industry refers to this position as Chief Information Officer (or CIO). William Synott, in his excellent book, *Information Resource Management*, defined it this way: "(The) senior executive responsible for establishing corporate information policy, standards, and management control over all corporate information resources." Substitute the word "institutional" for "corporate" and we have it.



A Case in Point

This definition suggests some of the institutional characteristics that will lead to success or failure.

As an example, let me describe an institution that recently asked me to do some consulting. This is a strong school academically, modestly endowed but doing okay, enrollments are holding steady, and it's been increasingly involved with computers. It has about 8,000 students in all. It uses microcomputers and a minicomputer to support academic computing; the administrators use a combination of microcomputers and a rather large IBM mainframe. Overall, a fairly typical picture.

Then, suddenly, a few things happened that led to turmoil. First, the alumni/development people came back from a conference with the notion that they ought to have their own computer system, rather than continuing to rely on centralized services. This was especially urgent since the school was about to launch a sizable capital campaign. People at the conference had told them it would be impossible to accomplish their goals without the proper computer support. And obviously what they were getting now wasn't proper, since they had to share it with other offices. A software vendor had taken them out to dinner on the second night of the conference and they felt pretty sure they knew which system they wanted.

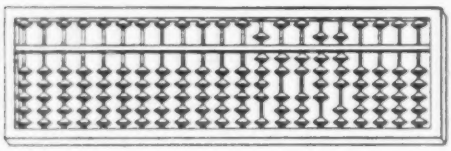
Next, several faculty members began lobbying to require all students to bring their own microcomputers with them to school next year. After all, several schools around the country had already adopted such a requirement, and this institution didn't want to be left behind. Besides, if such a proposal were endorsed by the faculty senate, it would stand to reason that the administration would then have to buy microcomputers for all faculty members.

Then the financial vice president decided that what the campus really needed was its own private telephone system so costs could be controlled better. And of course, in this modern day and age, the new system should transmit data as well as voice over the very same lines . . . and enable the university to resell long-distance services to its dormitory students . . . all computer controlled, of course.

On top of all this, the dean of the Business School had privately negotiated an excellent arrangement with a local computer manufacturer to supply a student computer room with 35 of the latest, greatest 38-bit, 5-nanosecond, bubble-memory, fixed-disk microcomputers. Students had actually been able to use them for four and a half weeks before the manufacturer went Chapter 11 and they needed some spare parts.

Well, needless to say, central administrators were beginning to feel more than a little overwhelmed. The computer center director was starting to feel like a normal university administrator, spending more time in meetings than at his desk. And with the regular demand for data processing increasing as usual in the midst of all of this, things really began to break down. Service levels dropped dramatically, and normally calm people began to act demanding and frustrated and angry.

So this institution did what so many would do under the circumstances: it looked to the outside for a solution. It decided what it really needed was *one person who could coordinate all of this*. It needed someone who would stay technologically current, monitor everything happening on campus, make sure the right people were talking to each other, help everyone make sensible decisions, and devise and carry out information-resource policies. Yes, what they needed was their very own Chief Information Officer.



And now, the rest of the story. They did actually find someone and everything was great for a while. Soon after arriving on campus, the new "Associate Vice Chancellor for University-Wide Information Services and Computer-Based Support Systems" began dealing with the issues that had brought him to campus in the first place. He was named to all of the right committees, of course, including the University Executive Long-Range Planning and Strategic Outlook Task Force, which he knew was special because it had 43 of the most important people on campus and met every semester.

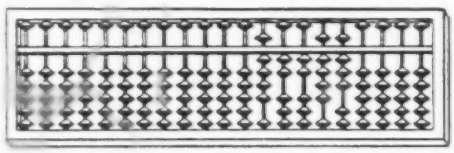
The alumni/development people were very happy to see him; they figured his honeymoon period on campus would allow him to get whatever he thought necessary. They were the first to take him to lunch. The faculty were just a little wary (the school had hired him as a full-fledged administrator with no teaching duties); but they figured they could count him as an ally since he had come from a school that had just instituted a computer-purchase requirement. The financial vice president was especially happy, since it was clear that the new czar favored centralized control over computing. The Business School dean was equally pleased, because it was obvious that the czar was a strong supporter of decentralized computing. (They had both been on the search committee, and had made sure to ask the right questions.)

Unfortunately, things didn't turn out the way everyone expected. When the new czar actually began negotiating with various constituencies, he found many people were already polarized around particular positions. Worse, if anyone caught the president's ear with a reasonable-sounding argument, that person stood a good chance of getting what he wanted. It was up to the new czar to make some tough decisions, sometimes unpopular ones, but the tougher these decisions were, regardless of merit, the less it seemed he could rely on the support of the rest of the executive staff to carry them out.

The words of David Stonehill, the vice-provost for computing at the University of Pennsylvania, began to echo in his ear: "The only thing we have in common with a czar is the ability to be assassinated."

Despite campus enthusiasm toward computers and other technologies, the new czar discovered tremendous resistance to dealing with the *issues* surrounding technology and its appropriate incorporation. People were reluctant to serve on committees unless it looked as if they would directly benefit from doing so, usually by getting more computer equipment for themselves or their offices. People were reluctant to have their own vendor decisions challenged, even by someone who clearly had greater technical expertise than they. And people were reluctant to postpone the satisfaction of their own needs, even when it was likely that interests of the institution were at jeopardy.

Although things were fine for a short time, the same problems began arising that had been there in the first place. Why? Because by hiring a high-level officer to be in charge of all the technology issues, they weren't solving the real problems—they were trying to make them go away. The real impetus behind hiring the new Czar was to allow all the other top-level people to avoid learning what they themselves needed to know about technology. They wanted all of the responsibility in one place and in one position, so that they didn't have to deal with it.



Traits Leading to Success

While we can't generalize from one example to every institution, I do think there are important *traits* that need to be present to increase the chance for success with a computer czar. More important than the presence of these traits in successful schools, is the *absence* of one or more of them in schools that contemplate taking this major step.

- The first trait is a *well-thought-out position on computing*, resulting from a great deal of experience, including having made some big mistakes. In other words, the school should not look for someone who will make sure they don't make any mistakes on the road to technological sophistication. Technology is fraught with risk; avoiding mistakes means not taking risks, and that is an inherently incompatible position with respect to technology. Even if someone else has done the same thing a hundred times before, even if you yourself have done the same thing a dozen times before, there just are no guarantees in computing.
- The second is that upper-level administrators and faculty should *already know a great deal about technology*. They should be (to use a terribly hackneyed phrase) "computer literate." Of course, I don't mean that the president should know how to program in FORTRAN, but by having a computer czar on campus, the others should not be excused from knowing about computers.
- Third, the computer people at work on campus should *already know a great deal about their institution* and about higher education in general. They should know what the goals of their institution

are, and how they are contributing to them, both as department members and as individuals. And they should know that a college is different from a business enterprise or a manufacturing company. By hiring a computer czar, the institution should not be looking to make up for the computer people in the basement not knowing where they work.

- Fourth, institutional leaders should already have internalized enough of the issues surrounding technology in higher education to be able to make *informed judgments*. They should not be looking for an expert or "high priest" to do the decision-making for them. The decision-makers at the school should be in a position to distinguish the merits of different viewpoints about computing, just as they must in other areas such as finance or enrollment management. The school may have a chief financial officer, but that doesn't mean that the president can't decide the merits of setting up a limited partnership for new dormitory construction.
- Fifth, the school should have a *governance structure* in place that listens to input from all over the campus. There should be sufficient, functioning computer advisory groups, with members who know what's best for themselves as users, but can also take a broad look at what's best for the institution. In other words, the school should not concentrate power in the hands of a single individual.
- Sixth, the institution should have already made significant inroads into *end-user computing and distributed processing*. It should have begun to grapple with issues of "who's in charge here" and "who should be in charge." It should not be looking to stem the tide of personal computing by hiring someone who will revert to strict centralized control. The school should have already passed through this stage, and have seen the wisdom of computing being in the hands of the people who need it most—the end users.
- And finally, the school should have an *overall strategic plan* in place, from which the long-range computing plan can be drawn. Alternatively, it should be prepared to give the computer people significant input into the development of a strategic plan. In other words, the school should not expect the czar to develop a long-range plan for computing in the absence of an overall long-range plan.

The bottom line—by hiring a computer czar, the school should not be looking for someone who will make all the problems go away. A very wise person once said that owning a computer is a lot like having a spouse to help you with problems you wouldn't have if you hadn't gotten married. Well, having a computer czar in an institution that isn't ready for one is like having commencement at the end of the freshman year: too much learning remains for the step to make sense.

What of the schools that don't have the traits I've listed? What if they go ahead and hire a czar anyway? Will it really hurt? Will it really cost any more than a few mis-spent salary dollars? The answer is yes. It raises some very serious long-range implications, and situations that are potentially disastrous.

It is important to understand that the CIO post is more than just a job slot. It is a *signal*. It indicates how an institution will deal with one of the most important forces to hit higher education in its history—the force of technology. It indicates whether the college is dealing with it well or badly, in an integrated or a disintegrated way, effectively or ineffectively.

Timing in this situation is so critical. Having a czar come on campus too early means taking a risk that there won't be the support structure in place for the person to succeed. He or she could be a czar without a government, just a figurehead. Or, too much or too little power will be placed in the position (although it may well be that no one will really know how much genuine power there is). The difference in this instance between real and imagined power can be the difference between success and failure.

Worst of all, the expectations for the position may be so entirely unrealistic that they will lead to nothing but frustration and disappointment, both on the part of the institution and the individual.

In light of all this, perhaps a new position announcement is in order. What most institutions could probably use is not a czar but someone more benevolent: someone who will educate others about the issues (but not necessarily about the technology), who will help shape the future but not dictate its outcome. Perhaps the *Chronicle* needs to run an ad something like this:

Position Announcement: Chief Information Officer

Job Description: To help educate others on campus about more effective uses of information resources and development of such things as efficient delivery systems. To help bring information to those who need it, when they need it, and in a form they can use. To coordinate, but not control. To translate, but not interpret. To have a vision of technology as a tool, but not as an end in itself.

Qualifications: A good understanding of the potential of technology to help further the educational process, and an ability to communicate that understanding with those who may not be as technically proficient. Walking on water is not at all necessary, but a willingness to at least get one's feet wet, while showing others the value of doing so, is. A sense of humor is essential, because we're all going to have to muck through this together somehow, and laughing along the way certainly will help.

What we need, in short, is someone who can help expand our horizons and opportunities. We need someone who will be an *enabler*. And while we want that person to help us take the very best advantage of technological innovations, it is critical that we provide an environment for success. ■